

Going Social: How Leading Non-Profits are Moving Beyond Facebook with Private Social Networks

Social networking sites have the potential to be powerful tools for non-profits. Many milestones have already been achieved when it comes to the global adoption of social networks, as people strive to connect and collaborate with those who share similar interests—more than 500 million people actively using [Facebook](#)¹, one billion tweets are sent out each week over [Twitter](#)², and more than 100 million professionals have joined [LinkedIn](#)³, to name a few. These sites are quickly changing the way people consume news, do business, find jobs, work, communicate and interact with their favorite brands. Non-profits are already taking a serious look at how to best leverage social networking and capitalize on the opportunities it presents now, and in the future. Those organizations that can get behind social networking today will be able to drive constituent acquisition, retention and engagement, and blow past the competition.

Understanding Social Networking Adoption

Although a still relatively young technology, social networking has quickly become a global phenomenon. According to [In-Stat](#)⁴, there are more social networking accounts than there are people in the world. The research firm found that there were more than 10 billion registered social networking and online world accounts at the end of 2010, and that nearly half of these are active. [comScore](#)⁵ also reported that in June 2010, 924 million Internet users around the globe visited a social networking site.

And despite some believing that it's just a passing phase, social networking is becoming a normal part of life for Internet users. [Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project](#)⁶ found that people across 22 countries are accessing the web specifically for social networking purposes. Furthermore, [TNS Global's "Digital Life" survey](#)⁷ revealed that on average, people are spending more time on social networking sites (4.6 hours each week) than on email (4.4 hours each week), the most common daily web activity.

In the United States

Social networking is a more than routine online activity for Americans. [eMarketer](#)⁸ recently predicted that in 2011, 63.7% of U.S. Internet users (or nearly 148 million people) will use social networks on a regular basis, and this number is expected to steadily increase to 67% (164.2 million) by 2013. Meanwhile, [Nielsen](#)⁹ reported that Americans spend nearly a quarter of their time online using sites like Facebook and Twitter.

In the United Kingdom

And social networks have trumped all other forms of online content in the U.K. According to [Experian Hitwise](#)¹⁰, the sites received more than 2.4 billion Internet visits in January 2011 alone. The top social network fueling this traffic? Facebook. [Clicky Media](#)¹¹ found that the site is adding one million U.K. users each month, half of U.K. users are logging into their accounts every day, and U.K. users are spending an average of 22 minutes per each Facebook session.

In Australia

Likewise, social networks are playing a prominent role within Australians' digital lives. According to [comScore's State of the Internet in Australia](#)¹², social networking's reach has grown by four percent from 2009 to 2010. Largely driven by Facebook and the increasing popularity of photo-sharing sites, it accounts for one in every five minutes spent online. The [research firm](#)¹³ also noted that 83% of Internet users in the country have visited a social networking site.

In Canada

Canadians, too, are readily engaging in social networking. [eMarketer](#)¹⁴ estimated that about 59% of Internet users (15.1 million people) in the country would visit social networking sites on a monthly basis in 2010, and said that it expects this figure to increase to 68% (18.4 million) by 2014. Meanwhile, [comScore](#)¹⁵ noted that Canadians spend more time online than other web users around the world, and that the number of unique visitors to social networking sites increased by 13 percent in 2010.

The numbers have demonstrated that social networking is here to stay—and non-profits are already embracing the trend. According to the [University of Massachusetts Dartmouth's Center for Marketing Research](#)¹⁶, the 200 biggest non-profits are outpacing both the Fortune 500 and the Inc. 500 in terms of social networking adoption. Additionally, the [Weber Shandwick Social Impact survey](#)¹⁷ found that 88% of non-profits are widely experimenting with social media, with 51% saying that they are active users. Ninety-two percent of non-profit executives even confirmed through this study that their online presence raises awareness of their organizations. This uptick in social networking has created a number of ways for non-profits to recruit, retain and empower constituents, increase engagement and much more.

Public or Private Social Networking Tools?

Although research reinforces non-profits' acceptance of social networking, the numbers do not clearly show whether organizations have adopted public, or private more exclusive tools. Public tools refer to external public sites, like Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, which allow non-profits to display their branding, establish followings, maintain and monitor their reputations, keep constituents informed and direct supporters back to their main web sites. These social networks can be creatively used to generate awareness, such as through a viral campaign to get Facebook users to change their profile pictures and make donations in support of their favorite causes; however, they are not magic bullets for some activities like fundraising.

But while non-profits ramp up their participation and generate brand awareness on public social networks, many don't realize the risks of not fostering private social

networks. These communities reside on organizations' own websites, and can be automatically linked to their existing member or donor database systems. As such, non-profits might miss out on opportunities to gain insight into their constituent bases and provide unique value-add to each member or donor by not being able to capture and analyze their data. With private social networking capabilities, non-profits can also easily maintain their branding and keep constituents informed, while providing a direct home for community activity, which, in turn, contributes to increased website traffic and improved search engine optimization.

Leveraging Private Social Networks to Improve Constituent Engagement

In order to keep up with the likes of public social networks, such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, that allow people to freely interact with others who have similar interests, it is essential that non-profits harness the power of private social networking tools. By doing so, organizations can grow their communities, promote greater online engagement, keep constituents invested and make other improvements that will help them reach their goals. The following best practices have been amassed from Advanced Solutions International's 20-plus years of working with non-profits, the company's social networking partner, GoLightly, and organizations themselves.

Vet new ideas. Encouraging constituents to participate in private online communities and provide feedback on the exclusive sites will let them know that their thoughts and suggestions are being heard and taken into consideration. And by doing so, non-profits can not only learn more about constituents' needs and concerns and how well members and donors feel they are being served, but also gain the insight they need to more effectively plan annual conferences and meetings, modify operational processes and improve continuing education, social media and other informational resources. In addition, organizations can use their private social networks to identify their most responsive members or donors and acknowledge their frequent participation to keep other constituents motivated. As they contribute to discussions and express their own ideas, members and donors will gain recognition for their expertise within the private communities and feel closer to the organizations.

In the U.K., the ProgressCRM Users' Group launched a private social network to give its constituents a bigger voice in the technology development process. Previously, members could only raise product issues to support via an email system, and they would never see a log as to solutions' progress. Now, using the organization's online community, members can instantly pull product information, privately discuss updates with their peers, more efficiently provide feedback to the ProgressCRM Users' Group and track future development initiatives. The ProgressCRM Users' Group also plans to implement a voting system for those in the community to easily share if they like or dislike changes made to their technology. Members have appreciated gaining better

visibility into the product development process, and credit the organization's private social network with allowing them to become an active part of it.

Build a knowledge base. Private online communities can serve as a place for staff, board members and volunteers, among others, to share valuable information and contact details around the clock—and within a trusted network. Organizations can post announcements, industry news, event photos and videos to their private social networks, and encourage constituents to look to the sites as their main sources of information. Non-profits can also establish blogs for thought leaders to share their insight, and develop groups, forums and libraries for constituents to tap into the collective wisdom of their organizations. It's important to make sure that content is kept fresh and easy to find in order to engage members or donors, draw them back to the private social networks and ensure that the communities remain active.

AGN International – North America, for example, implemented a private, exclusive social network to serve as a one-stop shop for premium, member-only content. The association decided to replace the expensive yet limited and problematic tool it was using and maintain a private, online knowledge bank to organize and supply constituents with information, including webcasts and audio files. Staff can now automatically upload and archive the content, and members can easily find, access, comment on and share the information—at any time. Plus, if members don't want to go to the knowledge bank, they can send an email using the online community's listserve functionality and immediately get answers back with the content they are looking for from their peers. AGN International – North America's private social network has quickly become the focal point of its members' experiences and plays a central role in their continued professional development.

Keep constituents better connected. Private social networks present the opportunity for those with shared interests to bridge information gaps, keep in touch 24/7/365 and effectively collaborate even if geographically dispersed. Non-profits should make their constituents aware of why they want to facilitate this close communication and the benefits it will bring to them; for example, these tools are becoming even more essential to the careers of members, donors and others—and what about helping their favorite organizations try to achieve their missions? Non-profits can also encourage constituents to develop profiles that are much like those required for public social networks, and to share their knowledge and contact details within the trusted, exclusive network. With internal tools, organizations can build vibrant online communities that capitalize on the relationships they have with their constituents and the connections that those in the community have formed with one another.

For Certified Management Accountants (CMA) of Ontario, a private social network was essential for making constituents feel connected to the organization. It didn't want to compete with public tools like Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, and thought it could see greater engagement by streamlining its online activities. As such, CMO chose to

establish an official home for fostering communication and collaboration with members—no matter where they are located and where they are in their careers—directly on its website. CMA now uses its online community to share professional development opportunities, encourage participation in live and virtual networking events, post educational content and form discussion groups. The organization has already witnessed steady improvements in terms of member engagement and participation on its private social network, and plans to further integrate its online community into its day-to-day activities, with the goal of helping constituents feel even more closely connected to CMA.

Embrace the evolution of the web and integrated communications. Non-profits can take advantage of the popularity of social networking to engage their constituents and use viral marketing on public sites to reach out to new ones. Younger members and donors, in particular, are already using these tools and find it appealing to know that organizations are keeping up with technology and providing interactive, digital content to entice them to join or give. At the same time, non-profits need to remember that the easier their communities are to use, the more likely it will be for constituents to come back and contribute. To further cultivate their communities and constituent engagement, non-profits can cross-promote their social networks in their email newsletters and at their annual conferences.

After making some changes to its reform process, the Liberal Party of Australia – Victorian Division saw attendance at its traditional, town hall meetings decline and members feel increasingly disconnected from the party. To combat this, it deployed a private social network that enabled those who didn't wish to attend the in-person forums to instead participate online. The Liberal Party of Australia – Victorian Division incorporated newer communications technologies, such as hosting live chats, sharing videos and conducting virtual events, to invigorate members' discussions on policy and other issues relevant to the party. By catering to constituents' desires for interactive content and building on their awareness of social networking capabilities, the Liberal Part of Australia – Victoria Division saw success. Participation in policy took an upward turn, and the political party was even able to engage constituents that it could not previously reach.

Non-profits are increasingly taking up social networking to create a sense of community among its constituents. But now is especially the time for them to leverage exclusive tools and be able to give members and donors the added value they are looking for. Those organizations that can identify how their constituents are using these sites and integrate social networking into their strategies will be able to grow their communities, promote greater online engagement, keep constituents invested and make other improvements to help them reach their goals and stay ahead of the competition.

Resources & References

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